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SUBJECT: Lukashenko Has No Friends Or Money

Ref: Minsk 440

¶1. Summary: Famous Russian journalist Oleg Poptsov recently interviewed President Lukashenko on the Russian TV channel "Tsenttr". Poptsov, previously known for his pro-democratic stance, surprisingly agreed with Lukashenko on most topics and portrayed Lukashenko as an honorable president. Lukashenko lambasted the opposition, praised his corruption-free government, and slammed Russia's lack of assistance to Belarus. On a more personal side, Lukashenko claimed to be a poor public servant, with little money and few friends, who would die defending his country. End summary.

Luka's Take on the Opposition

¶2. On July 11, Russia's channel "TV Tsenttr" broadcast writer Oleg Poptsov's June 2 interview with President Lukashenko. The original interview lasted three hours, but only 20 minutes of the interview made it to TV. Lukashenko first lambasted the opposition and explained why they behave irresponsibly. According to the president, the small prosperous faction of the opposition, which he claimed to be part of, joined his government when he came to power. Lukashenko claimed that, unlike what is currently happening in Ukraine where the new government has arrested, threatened to arrest, or fired 19,000 Kuchma-era officials, he let most incumbent government employees keep their jobs and made sure no one harmed his rivals. Today's opposition is much different, composed of lazy former government officials and "mercenaries", meaning nationalists or pro-Westerners who support any idea for a profit.

¶3. Lukashenko proceeded to speak of the opposition's reaction to his decree renaming Skaryna and Masheroava Avenues to Independence and Victors' Avenues. Though the opposition claims to favor independence, they opposed the street names simply because it was Lukashenko's idea. "Even if I did something that was written in their manifesto they would still oppose it." [Note: Poptsov, agreeing with every word, gave an agreeable chuckle.] The president admitted he did not like the opposition and told Poptsov that Russians would not like it if such an opposition existed in Russia.

¶4. The president strongly stated that there is no base for a revolution in Belarus because conditions that fomented revolutions in Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzia do not exist. However, some nations continue to smuggle money across Belarus' borders to fund the opposition and their revolutionary goals. The president cited the arrest of a Lithuanian who allegedly tried to bring USD 200,000 into the country (reftel) and claimed that the

border with Russia is also a trafficking route. Lukashenko wished the Belarusian opposition was more like the Russian opposition, which openly expresses its opinion but does not want to see the country "fall apart".

Education

15. Poptsov praised Lukashenko for his attention to the youth and their education in Belarus. Lukashenko responded that education, not health, is most important for an individual. According to Lukashenko, a healthy person without an education is just a healthy fool. Healthy fools are no good for society.

The President is Poor

16. According to Lukashenko, he receives a frugal salary of USD 1,200 a month and his ministers receive USD 800, which the president referred to as "ridiculous." However, Lukashenko said that he (rather than referring to the government) provides all ministers and important officials benefits, such as free apartments in Minsk and transportation. Lukashenko told Poptsov that in the village of Drozdi, he had built "little" cottages for the ministers next to his own. [Note: The cottages are actually quite large.] Lukashenko asked Poptsov to imagine being a minister in Belarus and living next door to the president. This is so that ministers can relax with greater security (or so Lukashenko claimed). 17. Referring back to his low salary, Lukashenko claimed he had no assets, not even an apartment or money hidden away. He gave a sad story of how his sons had asked him what would happen when he is no longer president. Poptsov admitted it was a good question and Lukashenko agreed. The president claimed he was in a corner, since he is an honest man (and 99 percent of Belarusians believe so), he cannot legally provide his children with an apartment because he does not have any money. [Note: One of his sons reportedly just imported a yellow Lamborghini.] If he loses the presidency, he would have to take out a loan to buy a home. Lukashenko hopes that after his tenure, he would receive a house or some place to live. If not, he would find a job and build an apartment, but this would not be normal, as he has done a lot for the country.

Not a Corrupt President

18. The president fervently denied having money hidden in foreign countries. He referred to the opposition's claims that he stole USD 17 billion from Belarus, noting that the amount is three times Belarus' 2004 budget and impossible to hide without the public's notice. "Even if I stole only two million, where is it?" Lukashenko told the story of when President Bush wanted to freeze all Lukashenko's "alleged" foreign accounts and Lukashenko in return sent Bush his income statement.

19. Lukashenko named himself a specialist in battling corruption, noting his term as head of Parliament's anti-corruption commission. Lukashenko claimed he shows no leniency to friends or colleagues who misappropriate funds, embezzle, or take bribes and noted how he has punished longtime allies for corruption. According to the president, the public sees how he treats his children and close allies and understands that his attitude towards everyone else will be the same. A leader should not forgive any mistakes or encourage wrong behavior.

I Have No Friends

¶10. Another sad moment occurred when Poptsov remarked how solitude comes with the presidency. Lukashenko admitted that he had hit a soft spot and that as time goes by, feelings of loneliness increases. He, unlike Putin, does not have a close circle of friends or colleagues. Lukashenko admitted he envied Moscow Mayor Yury Luzhkov's ability to make friends from all walks of life, but claimed he just does not have the same personality as Luzhkov. However, Lukashenko does enjoys the company of artists, singers, and composers and finds enjoyment when he and his associates, on rare occasions, play hockey. [Note: The camera showed pictures of Lukashenko, in slow motion, by himself, often with his head down with melancholic music playing in the background.]

Go Out Kicking and Screaming

¶11. Lukashenko told Poptsov that he, as president, defends Belarusians and not his power or his riches. [Note: Lukashenko quickly corrected his statement and said "alleged" riches.] He compared himself to former President of Chile Salvador Allende, in that he would defend his people, state, and power "with weapons in my hands, alone if necessary." Lukashenko called himself a man of ideals, principles, and pride. According to Lukashenko, the opposition knows of these characteristics and for this reason, would not attempt a revolution.

Belarusian Elite More Honest

¶12. Lukashenko opined that a Belarus-Russia Union is needed to thwart any revolutionary attempts in either country. The Union should give equal rights to both Belarusian and Russian citizens, but the Russian elite should agree to compete with their less numerous, but more honest, principled, educated, and dedicated Belarusian counterparts. According to Lukashenko, Russia is not ready for this.

¶13. Poptsov did not understand Lukashenko's comment and quickly replied that a Belarus-Russia Union should focus on a unified elite, not a competing one. Lukashenko interrupted and accused Poptsov (as Poptsov is part of the Russian elite) of planning to bribe Belarusian officials and intelligentsia in order to keep them idle.

¶14. Lukashenko then warned Poptsov, as he allegedly did Putin, that Russia would regret losing Belarus. "The Japanese lay claim to some islands in Russia's control. I say that the Russian leadership could give back the islands, which would be difficult for Russia, but she would live. But if Russia loses Belarus, the Russian people will never forgive and will not survive."

Russian TV Is A Lie

¶15. Lukashenko commented on Russian television, accusing it of insulting and confusing the Belarusian people. When TV personalities or shows discuss what is happening in Belarus, they do not tell the truth. This is not because the television stations want to lie, but because Anatoly Chubais orders them to do so. According to Russian TV, Russia is helping to prevent revolutions or drastic changes in Belarus by selling coal and energy resources to Belarus at cheaper prices. Lukashenko called this a farce and claimed that for the last five years, Belarus has purchased oil, metal and other

resources from Russia at world prices (except for natural gas).

Russia Gives Nothing

¶16. Lukashenko told Poptsov that Russia has done nothing for Belarus. Lukashenko noted how Russia pays Kazakhstan USD 190 million per year for using the Baikonur spaceport on its territory. However, Russia does not pay Belarus for its bases that communicate with submarines in the Atlantic and warn of American missile attacks. According to Lukashenko, Russia owes Belarus roughly USD 800 million dollars for the upkeep of the two bases.

Comment

¶17. Lukashenko's claims that he and his ministers live on less than USD 1000 are far from the truth. He lives in a large house on the outskirts of Minsk and Embaffs heard rumors that his son recently purchased a new Lamborghini while many government officials are driving new Mercedes, BMWs, Hummers, etc. around town. Lukashenko recently purchased a Boeing 737 to ferry him and his personal hockey team around. The clips of Lukashenko as a man of the people who efficiently runs the government at the expense of riches and friendship fly in the face of reality.

¶18. Such an interview that portrays Lukashenko as a heroic president and allows him to stand on his soapbox would be expected in Belarus' state-controlled media, but not on Russian television, which is usually critical of the Belarusian President. TV Tsentr, however, is owned by Moscow mayor Yury Luzhkov. The station also reportedly has two reporters in Minsk who will create five glowing news programs on Belarus each week. A reliable Embassy source who met with the reporters claimed these programs are being funded by Pavel Borodin from the Union State budget.

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